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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PARM](#) [KNNP](#) [MASS](#) [ETRD](#) [IR](#) [RS](#)  
SUBJECT: RUSSIAN EXPERTS ON MOSCOW'S APPROACH TO IRAN  
  
REF: MOSCOW 3434

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador William J. Burns for reasons 1.  
4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary: "Balance" is the word used to describe Russia's Iran policy by Moscow's leading Iran watchers. Putin is sufficiently concerned about Iran's nuclear program to keep Russia engaged on the issue. According to the MFA, he will reinforce the point with Ahmadinejad in Tehran October 16. Yet, Russia doesn't view the Iranian regime as a direct and immediate threat to its interests and intends to continue its longstanding political and economic ties to Tehran. Hence, Russia's policy of engagement, arms sales and carefully calibrated cooperation on Bushehr. None the less, experts here believe that, at the end of the day, unchanged Iranian behavior will lead Russia to support a third UNSC resolution in December, but will resist efforts by the U.S. and European powers to take a rougher approach to Iran. In other words, Russia wants to maintain a united front with the west on Iran's nuclear weapons program, but does not believe the current situation requires a more drastic response. End Summary.

GOR Paying Close Attention to Iran  
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¶2. (C) MFA Iran expert and Deputy Director for the Second Asia Department Ali Moustafabeli told us that Russia is increasingly concerned about Ahmadinejad's extremist "and even erratic" behavior. Aside from Iran's nuclear aspirations, Moustafabeli acknowledged Iran's aggressive promotion of Shiite Islamic Revolution, which mainly involves active support of: radical Shiite groups in Iraq, including Moqtadr al-Sadr's group, and Iraqi PM al-Maliki's government; and radical Islamic groups Hamas in Israel and Hizbollah in Lebanon. Moustafabeli also did not deny Iran's increasingly active role in Afghanistan, agreeing that Iran has ratcheted up its support of Shia mullahs and political parties in the country.

Putin Will Talk Tough with Adhmadinejad  
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¶3. (C) Moustafabeli stressed that Putin's primary reason for attending the October 16 Caspian Sea Summit was to reiterate to Ahmadinejad "in unambiguous terms" that Iran must fulfill its UNSC and IAEA obligations regarding its nuclear energy program and immediately cease all enrichment activities. Putin will also urge Ahmadinejad to step back from his "extreme views and activities" in the region and "reach a compromise" with the international community. In an effort to demonstrate the extent to which Russia was prepared to go to moderate Iran's behavior, Moustafabeli noted that the Iranian leadership has repeatedly conveyed its "disappointment" with Russia's strong support of the IAEA and UNSC discussions on Iran. Moustafabeli asserted that the nuclear weapons issue has significantly affected the

"historically deep and intense" bilateral relationship, but Russia was committed to maintaining the pressure on the regime.

#### But Not Too Tough; Russia's Balanced Approach to Iran

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¶4. (C) However, Moustafabeli expressed in equally strong terms Russia's reluctance to intensify at this time the international pressure on Ahmadinejad. Moustafabeli identified Russia's fundamentally different perception of Iran as the defining factor in Russia's "go slow" approach to Iran. Russia does not perceive Iran as the primary destabilizing factor in the region and the "international menace" that the U.S. and EU make the regime out to be.

#### Key Elements of Russia's Perception of Iran

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¶5. (C) Well-connected political analysts in Moscow firmly support Moustafabeli's position and they point to the following factors that "justify" Russia's more balanced approach to Iran's resurgence:

-- Iran Is "Years Away" From A Nuke: Moustafabeli and Institute for Strategic Assessments President Aleksandr Konovalov posited that a key difference between Russia's and the West's understanding of the Iranian threat is that the former is not convinced Iran possesses the technology and equipment to produce a nuclear weapon within the next three to five years. Russian Institute for Strategic Studies Director Yevgeniy Kozhokin, whose institute provides analysis to Russia's security services, added that any intelligence data that suggests otherwise is at best inaccurate, and at

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worst, fabricated to present a stronger case for invading Iran.

-- Nuclear-Armed Iran Is Not End of the World: Russia clearly does not want another addition to the nuclear weapons club. However, Moustafabeli and our contacts said there are considerably more "catastrophic scenarios," such as a nuclear-armed Pakistan without Musharraf in power. Israel and Middle East Studies Institute Director Yevgeniy Satanovskiy stressed that this possibility causes more concern for Russia than Iran's possession of a nuclear weapon.

-- Iran's Nuclear Ambitions Are Defensive in Nature: Moustafabeli and others with whom we spoke claim to be convinced that Iran's nuclear aspirations are primarily in response to the "very real possibility" of a U.S.-led attack on Iran. Institute for Political and Military Analysis Senior Analyst Aleksandr Kramchikin asserted that Iran views a nuclear weapon as little more than an insurance policy.

-- Iranian Activities "Logical Response" to U.S. Policies: Despite its own qualms, Russia does not view Iran's support of radical Islamic groups in Iraq, Lebanon, and Israel as anything other than a realpolitik response to U.S. policies in the region. While certainly not endorsing Iran's support of terror and extremism, Moustafabeli said Russia considers the current unrest in Iraq a greater cause for long-term instability. Analysts agreed, arguing that Iran, as a "natural regional power," is only filling the power vacuum left by the departure of Saddam Hussein. Ahmadinejad will maintain regular contact with the al-Maliki government, but Russia acknowledges that Iran aims to keep Iraq feeble and non-threatening to Iranian interests. Russia in Global Affairs Editor Fedor Lukyanov added that Iran's Shiite Islamic Revolution is also aimed at balancing Israeli and Saudi Sunni influence in the region. If the USG were to adjust its policies in the region, including committing to a withdrawal of troops from Iraq, then Russia analysts assert that we would observe a commensurate shift in Iran's foreign

policy.

-- Iran's Activities Not Directed at Russia: Iran's aggression is mainly directed at the United States, and not at Russia or even the EU. IMEMO Iran expert Vladimir Yevseyev pointed out that Iran's Shiite Islamic revolution is not likely to stir up sectarian violence in Russia, given that the 20 million Muslims in Russia are nearly all Sunni. Moustafabeli asserted that notwithstanding his government's commitment to deal with Iran's nuclear weapons program, Russia still has to protect its "substantial" interests in Iran's defense, energy, and transportation sectors. Acknowledging that Russia's trade with Iran is only around \$2.5 billion and the \$800 million Bushehr nuclear plant project no longer represents "big money" for Russia, New Eurasia Foundation President Andrei Kortyunov and Lukyanov maintained that Russia still wants to keep its foot in the door for whenever the nuclear weapon issue is resolved.

-- Iranian Domestic Politics Will Prevail: Moustafabeli argued that Ahmadinejad's radical views, disastrous handling of the economy, and pariah status in the international community, have eroded much of his domestic popular support, and it is "entirely possible" that he will be voted out of office in the 2009 presidential elections. Moustafabeli cited the Iranian president's defeat in the most recent municipal elections and the selection of "pragmatist" Ali Rafsanjani as chairman of the powerful Council of Experts as the most telling indicators of Ahmadinejad's uncertain position. Yevseyev relayed to us reports from his personal contacts in Iran about Iranians' growing frustration with the ever-rising fuel prices, claiming that the Iranian government is now rationing fuel to families in increments of only 100 liters per month via gas cards. However, Moustafabeli and experts note that Ahmadinejad still enjoys some level of popular support because he continues to skillfully portray the USG as the enemy. Institute of Oriental Studies Director Vyacheslav Belokrenitskiy asserted that Iranians are above all nationalists and tougher sanctions or a military strike against the regime would only motivate the masses to rally around their president.

#### Diplomatic Approach Key to U.S.-Russian Cooperation on Iran

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¶6. (C) In light of these factors, Moustafabeli said Russia will likely support adopting a third UNSC resolution in December (assuming Iran fails to fulfill its obligations under the IAEA action plan), but Russia will insist on a "soft" document, without much teeth. Cautioning against more confrontational approaches, Moustafabeli argued the West and Russia needed to maintain a coordinated and united front

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against Iran. He added that Putin is sufficiently concerned about Iran's nuclear weapons program to keep him focused and engaged on this issue, but Russia does not assess that the current circumstances require a more drastic or swift response. Policy Foundation President Vyacheslav Nikonov agreed with Moustafabeli's assessment that Russia would walk away from any scenario that involved significantly broader economic sanctions and would actively oppose a military solution.

Comment

¶7. (C) Many of our official and outside contacts are concerned about Iran's blatant defiance of its international obligations and its destabilizing tendencies in the region, but they are clearly more concerned about possible U.S. and EU approaches to solve the Iranian problem. Although Russia will continue to pursue its juggling act, Moscow's support for a third (even if watered-down) UNSC resolution could further chip away at Russia's strategic relationship with Iran.

